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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of elementary school teachers and students toward portfolio assessment. A total of 11 teachers and 116 students in grades 3 through 5 responded to open-ended questions regarding the benefits of portfolios for highlighting students' written work. Teachers were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of portfolio assessment and their benefits for teachers and students, while the students were asked about the standards they employed for selecting their best writing (which appeared in a student literary magazine) and how they might improve the work they selected. The study found that while some teachers noted that they did not have enough time to manage portfolios, most listed numerous benefits for both teachers and students in using this assessment technique. Portfolio assessment also revealed that students' standards for their writing differed according to age. Younger students noted the length of their selection or the presence of humor as the main criteria, while older students cited their interest in the essay topic or its meaning to them as the most important selection criteria. Summaries of selected teacher and student responses are provided. (MDM)

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Student and Teacher Reflections Regarding Writing Portfolios in the Elementary Classroom

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Student and Teacher Reflections Regarding Student Portfolios in the Elementary Classroom

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Teachers and students located in a small southeastern elementary school (330 K-5th grade students) developed student writing portfolios over the course of the 1993-94 school year. The project was coordinated by two parent volunteers associated with the school's parent group. Each month students selected their best writing work to be placed in individual folders. Teachers agreed to help the students manage the portfolios during the project. Parent coordinators sent reminders to teachers about maintaining the portfolios throughout the year. At the conclusion of the year, each student selected one piece of work to be included in the school's literary magazine. In late May, students and teachers were asked to respond in written form about their experiences with the portfolio project.

THEORY

Portfolios for students are being used more frequently as educators search for ways to better document what students know and can do, show student development, promote student self-reflection, and integrate instruction and assessment (Arter & Spandel, 1992). A student portfolio can be defined as a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of a student's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area (Northwest Evaluation Association, 1990).

There are two types of portfolios -- showcase portfolios and assessment portfolios (Vavrus, 1990). Showcase portfolios are collections of students' best work. Student assessment portfolios

are evaluated against predetermined standards.

Students participating in this project developed showcase portfolios. They were instructed to select their best writing work each month to place in their portfolios. K-2 teachers assisted their students with this process; 3rd through 5th graders selected their own writing samples. Project purposes were to document student growth, promote student self-reflection, and have a sample of the student's best work for the literary magazine.

METHODS

At the close of the project, teachers (n=11) and third, fourth and fifth grade students (n=116) responded in written form to several open-ended questions related to the portfolio project. For the 3rd through 5th grades, there were approximately 40 students from each grade level who responded to the questions. Some respondents chose not to answer every question and others gave more than one response to a question. Teacher questions focused on portfolio management/improvement issues and portfolio benefits for teachers and students. The teacher questions were:

- For you, what were the difficulties in maintaining student portfolios?
- What are the benefits of portfolios for teachers?
- What are the benefits of portfolios for students?
- How could the portfolio project be improved?

Student questions centered specifically on their writing work as it related to portfolios -- standards for selecting their best work and improving "best" work.

Student questions were:

- Why did you chose this story for the literary magazine?

- If you could change your story, what would you do?

The overall themes were: portfolio management/improvement, teacher and student portfolio benefits, standards, quality control. The responses were placed under the appropriate themes. These responses told the story of the portfolio project at the elementary school.

FINDINGS

TEACHERS (N=11)

MANAGEMENT/IMPROVEMENT ISSUES

For teachers, two of the questions focused on the portfolio project difficulties and how those problems could be resolved.

- Three teachers noted that they did not have enough time to manage portfolios. Managing included placing selections in portfolios, conferencing and assessing work with students.
- Three primary (K-2) teachers responded that it was difficult to get original writing work from some students. These students were not at a point where they could independently put their thoughts on paper.
- One teacher had to monitor whether her students were placing writing work in their portfolios each month.
- A teacher reported that she wanted to send portfolios home with students to show to their parents, but was afraid to do so for fear that the portfolios would not be returned.
- Three teachers felt the portfolio process could be improved if parents volunteers could assist with management concerns -- placing selections in portfolios, assisting students with putting their thoughts on paper, helping with the editing process.

For primary teachers, the issues of students needing assistance with the writing process, conferencing, maintaining portfolios, and allowing students to take portfolios home to parents were issues. Primary teachers noted that some of their concerns could be resolved if they had volunteer help in the

classroom.

TEACHER BENEFITS

Teachers were asked how the student portfolios were helpful for them.

- Three teachers saw portfolios as clear evidence of student growth.
- Two teachers saw portfolios as a means of informally assessing students.
- Two teachers thought it was beneficial to share student portfolios with parents in a conference setting.
- A teacher believed portfolios were useful in showing how various writing techniques were taught.
- One primary teacher could see progress in students' fine motor skills and language development.
- A teacher reported that portfolios were easier to use than the journals she had used in the past.

STUDENT BENEFITS

Teachers were asked how the portfolios were helpful for students.

- Seven teachers stated that students could see their growth, progress, learning during the year.
- Five teachers reported that portfolios were a way for students to informally self-evaluate their own work.
- One teacher remarked that students enjoyed seeing samples of their work over time.

The goals of the portfolio project were met; student growth was documented throughout the school year and students were able to informally self-evaluate their work. Pluses included documentation of student skills for teachers and students enjoying seeing samples of their work throughout the school year.

STUDENTS (N=116)
STANDARDS

The following excerpts are highlights of student responses to two questions. For a detailed breakdown of student responses, see the tables following the quality control section. Students were asked why they chose the selection they did for the literary magazine.

- Three 5th grade students and five 3rd grade student could not write beyond "because it was good" (even though had been instructed to do so) when asked to describe why they chose a particular writing selection for the literary magazine.
- Seventeen 3rd graders chose the selection they did because they felt others would find it funny.
- Five 3rd graders thought length of the writing selection was important when making a decision about what should go in the literary magazine.
- There were 16 5th graders and nine 4th graders who chose the selection they did for the literary magazine because they liked the topic. There were no 3rd graders that responded in this way.
- Eight 5th graders selected the story they did because it was meaningful. Only two 3rd graders and two 4th graders responded similarly.

Standards for what was good selection for the literary magazine changed as students got older. Third graders were more concerned about meeting external standards than 5th graders. The younger students noted that the length of their selections and/or the presence of humor were reasons for placing them in the literary magazine. Perhaps because older students had more confidence in their writing abilities and the process, their standards were more internally motivated; they were concerned that they have an interest in the topic and/or the topic having meaning for them.

QUALITY CONTROL

When students were asked how they would change their literary magazine selections, their responses were surprising.

- Five 3rd graders, five 4th graders, and four 5th graders said they would change the topic.
- Two 3rd graders, four 4th graders, and three 5th graders would make their selection shorter or longer.
- Two 3rd graders and three 5th graders would add illustrations.
- Three 4th graders would use different words.
- Three 4th graders would make their selections more exciting.
- Two 5th graders would add more detail.

Since each student had at least 10 selections to chose from in their portfolios, it is puzzling why some 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders would feel the need to change their writing selection topic. Students across the board were concerned about selection length. Use of particular words, making selections more exciting, and adding detail demonstrate that students are aware of the writing process.

IMPLICATIONS

Teachers associated with this portfolio project saw the benefits -- a documentation of student growth available to students, parents, and teachers, an opportunity for students to critique their work, and a tool for assessing instructional techniques. Students were capable of making choices about what is their best work; standards changed depending on the age of the student. Portfolios appeared to be easier to implement in classrooms where the students were older and more independent.

Negatives associated with this project -- like a

Table 1

Why did you choose this writing selection from your portfolio for the Literary Magazine?

Student Responses	3rd Grade Students	4th Grade Students	5th Grade Students
Scary	1		2
Good story	5		3
Funny	17	6	
Exciting	2	4	
Realistic	2	2	3
Unusual	1		
Long	5		
Young children will like it		1	
Informative		2	1
Like the topic		9	16
Interesting		3	
Teacher liked it		1	
Detail	1	1	
Meaningful	2	2	8
Didn't care what I chose			2
Worked hard on it			1
Well-written			3
Fantasy			1

Table 2

If you could change your writing selection, what would you do?

Student Responses	3rd Grade Students	4th Grade Students	5th Grade Students
Scarier	1	1	
Different words	1	3	
Write a poem	1		
Topic change	5	5	4
Shorter or longer	2	4	3
More exciting	1	3	1
Add pictures	2		3
Neater	1	2	
Better handwriting	1		
More detail		1	2
Change characters			1
More descriptive			1

lack of teacher time and younger students being unable to manage the portfolios independently -- have been issues for educators across the country as they develop portfolio plans. Considerations for streamlining the portfolio process and having support in primary classrooms to organize portfolios should be priorities as educators begin portfolio initiatives.

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